

Congress: Black Wednesday

MICHAEL O'HALLORAN



SENATOR HUGH SCOTT

PAUL CONKLIN



REPRESENTATIVE JOHN RHODES

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SENATOR RICHARD SCHWEIKER

UPI



SENATOR MARLOW COOK

The late Speaker of the House of Representatives, Sam Rayburn, used to marvel at "those rolling waves of sentiment" that would occasionally engulf the House, abruptly establishing a solid consensus. Last week even Mister Sam might have been surprised at the swift surge of revulsion that swept both chambers of Congress. It came suddenly on Wednesday, eight days after the release of the presidential transcripts. The turn seemed to come with the gathering flow of mail running as much as 10-1 against the President, the opportunity for enough of the busy Congressmen finally to read through much of the transcripts, and the chain reaction of exchanges among the members in cloak-rooms and over coffee. Whatever the exact process, a critical mass was reached, and with it the concatenation of judgments devastating to Richard Nixon.

In the outpouring of condemnation on Capitol Hill, Democrats could hardly be distinguished from Republicans, newcomers from oldtimers, liberals from conservatives. As if of one mind, the nation's legislators blurted out their reactions: "damaging," "disgusting," "embarrassing," "disgraceful." Observed a House G.O.P. leader: "It sure was a consensus. You just sat on the floor and felt it." Said Ohio Conservative Republican Charles Whalen: "It happened on Wednesday. It all just fell in."

Moral Squalor. What appalled Congress was not so much the evidence of particular crimes as the moral squalor revealed in the transcripts. "This is the most nauseating thing I have ever read," declared a hitherto 100% Nixon loyalist, Louis Wyman of New Hampshire, who is not given to overstatement. Said Republican John Ashbrook, a conservative Representative from Ohio: "I listened to the President on television last Monday night, and for the first time in a year I believed him. Then I read the March 21 [1973] transcript, and it was incredible, unbelievable." Complained Massachusetts Republican Congressman Silvio Conte about the transcripts: "I have a better quality of conversation with my staff than they have. I have a hard time reading them. I can't stand it." Declaring that the transcripts "really raise more questions than they answer," Illinois G.O.P. Senator Charles Percy said that neither the courts nor Congress can be "satisfied that this is the whole story and that no further evidence needs to be produced."

Pennsylvania Republican Senator Richard Schweiker, urging the President to resign, said: "I cannot remain silent in the face of the now obvious moral corrosion destroying the presidency." Senator Marlow Cook, a Kentucky Republican, acknowledged that Nixon must "realistically contemplate" resig-

nation, adding: "The President has irretrievably lost any claim to the confidence of the American people."

Most damaging for the President was the defection of some of his key supporters who influence votes. House Minority Leader John Rhodes warned Nixon that if his position continued to deteriorate, he might have to "consider resignation as a possible option." Rhodes spent a full afternoon on the House floor listening to one Republican after another as they all offered variants of "I've had it." Rhodes gave them no argument. Representative John Anderson of Illinois, the third-ranking Republican in the House, took a similar

position. Claiming that the President had "damaged himself irreparably" by releasing the transcripts, he thought that the "welfare of the nation would be best served if Nixon considered voluntary resignation."

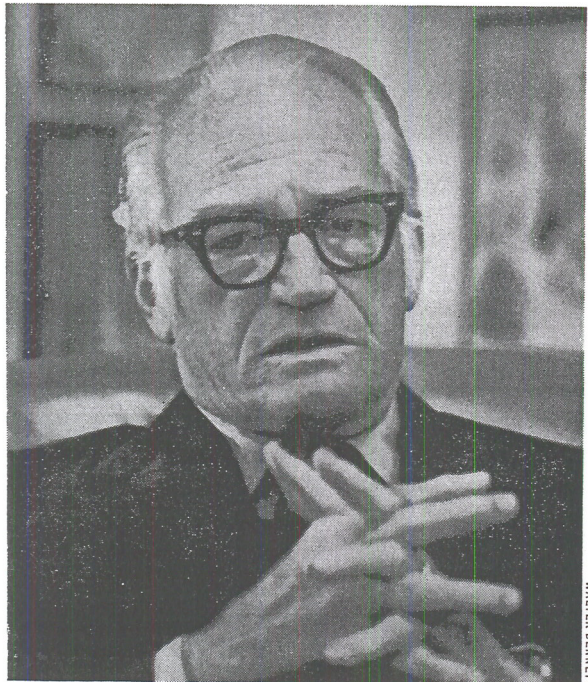
Perhaps the most fateful blow of all was delivered by Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, who had earlier insisted that the tapes would exonerate Nixon. Last December he had been given only part of the March 21 transcript by White House Chief of Staff Alexander Haig. According to his aides, Scott was "relieved" to be able finally to give his version of the story. Though he still called for "suspension of judgment" on the President's guilt or innocence in impeachment proceedings, he labeled the transcripts "deplorable, disgusting, shabby, immoral"—a description with which Rhodes said he agreed.

Did Scott include the President's performance in that description? He excluded no one, he said pointedly.

Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater is chairman of everybody's imaginary delegation of Republican elders who might some day call on Nixon and tell him to go. Goldwater has steadfastly declined the role, permitting himself some tart comment on Watergate but insisting that Nixon should not quit. Last week he was ominously quiet. In private, his aides said, he is despondent. "He thinks the situation is very, very grave," reported Tony Smith, his press secretary. "For a while he thought that profanity would be the major issue in the transcripts, but now he realizes it's more than that. The issue is: why the hell did Nixon never say, 'My God, you mean to say this was being done in the name of the White House?' We've been hearing for months

with each new revelation that it was the straw that would break the camel's back. But this really is the straw." Added Smith: "People are reading the transcripts. We are now hearing from the bedrock conservatives in Arizona, and they do not like what they are reading. They are telling us: 'We can no longer defend this man.' The only thing that is keeping Nixon alive is the slowness of the U.S. mails."

"Nobody's Perfect." Some of the President's hard-core supporters continued to defend him. Senator Strom Thurmond, Republican of South Carolina, said that he saw nothing in the transcripts that justified impeachment. Virginia G.O.P. Senator William Scott laconically commented on the President's role in the transcripts: "Nobody's perfect." Senator Wallace Bennett, Republican of Utah, criticized presidential crit-



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ics who called for resignation as being willing to "destroy the system."

But the ranks of even last-ditch Southern supporters were far from solid. Republican Senator John Tower of Texas, a Nixon loyalist, was described by an aide as being in a "state of anguish." While still maintaining that there was insufficient evidence to impeach, the aide admitted: "This thing is closing in on the President pretty hard right now." Said a Southern Senator: "You have to realize that these Southern members of Congress are not going to let their conservative leanings sway them if there is a clear moral issue involved. They are talking about the gutter language indicated in the transcript. They are deeply anguished that such a locker room climate prevailed in the White House, led by the President himself."

Even from a political standpoint, it might not make good sense for Southerners to continue to support Nixon. "Assume, for example," said a Repub-

lican Senate aide, "that the Senate is about to vote on guilt or innocence, and it appears that more than half but less than the required two-thirds are prepared to vote guilty. That would mean he would go back to the White House for another two years, with more than half the Senate convinced he is guilty. He would be a captive of Congress. The Southern conservatives wouldn't like that at all. If they saw it was about to happen, many of them would vote him guilty just to prevent it."

Head Count. In contrast to the G.O.P. indignation, the Democrats were taking the latest revelations almost in stride. The wisest of them have recognized all along that in the end, it would have to be Republicans who brought Nixon down. Observed Pennsylvania Congressman William Green: "They said at the White House that the transcripts would prove the President is innocent. They don't. Instead, they incriminate him." Said Georgia Represen-

tative Jack Flynt: "I can understand, after having read them, why he didn't want to release the transcripts." Added Representative John Brademas of Indiana: "There was an extraordinary moral obtuseness on the part of these people. It seems to me—subject to the work of the Judiciary Committee—that there is a clear possibility of criminality by the President. The hush money is the symbol of it."

While most Democrats regarded impeachment or resignation as an inevitability that they were bound to support, Republicans were still anguishing about how to ride the wave that was swamping them. Scarcely a Republican could be found to disagree with a remark last week by Connecticut Senator Lowell Weicker: "I think the party has no obligation whatever to defend the President." But they had not yet agreed on any concerted plan of action, such as going to the President and telling him to step down. Less patient outsiders have wondered why the Republicans have not summoned their courage and marched on the White House to demand the President's resignation. But the Republicans are too sensitive to both the winds of politics and the constitutional separation of powers to take any action that might drastically tip the scales of Government. The most they would do is take a head count on impeachment in both houses and submit their findings to the President. "I don't know what to do," said a top congressional leader. "I pray a lot." He meant it.

"Razor's Edge." But Republicans are generally agreed on what they would like the President to do on his own: resign. As they gathered in anxious huddles last week, as their mail piled up from angry constituents, they recognized that the President's troubles were also their own. The longer he clings to office, the harder it will be for them to win re-election in the fall. "We're on the razor's edge," said a Mid-Atlantic G.O.P. Congressman. "These are the facts of life." In the meantime, many Republicans feared that the President's delaying tactics were only making life more difficult for him. By attempting to drive a wedge between Democrats and Republicans on the Hill, the President's attorney James St. Clair may actually be thrusting them closer together. "I feel he's losing us," said a top-ranking Republican on the Judiciary Committee. "I think he's only trying to save his client. I don't think he gives a damn about the Republican Party."

Republican officeholders, of course, do care about their party—and last week more desperately than ever. For that reason, perhaps above any other practical one, the President's days in office seemed numbered. "Over the weekend, there are going to be some decisions made," said a top Republican congressional leader. "People are going to be thinking about things. I don't know what the decisions will be. I have the monkey on my shoulder, no doubt about it."